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SUBJECT: MONGOLIAN MEDIA'S RUN-UP TO PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REFTEL: ULAANBAATAR 320

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the last few days before Mongolia's June 29 Parliamentary elections, the local media organizations continued to focus on political mud-slinging by parties and criticism of the General Election Commission (GEC). Prime fodder in the press and on TV has been recent promises made by the country's two biggest parties regarding how to spread the wealth generated from yet-to-be-developed mining. Those parties, the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and the opposition Democratic Party (DP), appear to receive a disproportionate amount of press coverage. A newly established GEC Media Council is monitoring the balance of coverage and working to resolve media-related disputes. End Summary.

Conflicting Reports on Coverage Balance

¶2. (SBU) The Mongolian Press Institute recently stated that this election year has featured more balanced coverage of parties, but a recent report released by a media watchdog, the Global Institute (GI), says the two biggest parties - the MPRP and the DP -- are getting the lion's share of media attention. According to the GI report, both the MPRP and the DP are receiving more than twice the amount of coverage given to any smaller party. A final, official report on this issue is to be released by GI after the elections. (Note: All 76 seats in Parliament are up for grabs in the elections. Each voter in 26 districts (20 in the provinces and six in Ulaanbaatar) will choose between two and four candidates, depending on the size of their district. End Note.)

Newspapers Focusing on Attacks and Accusations

¶3. (SBU) Mongolia's political parties, rarely shy during the election season, are providing plenty of ammunition for the media to report on, and newspapers in particular have taken the bait. The vast majority of recent articles have focused not on policies or platforms, but on accusations and innuendo involving the parties and the GEC. (Note: Many parties have accused the GEC of pro-MPRP bias; seven of the nine commissioners are affiliated with the MPRP. End Note.) Some papers opted to on the tit-for-tat actions by the competing parties. After the MPRP demanded the dismissal of the GEC's DP-affiliated Secretary General, the Mongolian Medee newspaper ran the headline, "The DP sends a letter of demand to the MPRP related to its demand to dismiss the GEC Secretary General."

¶4. (SBU) Several recent articles have been aimed at sparking a scandal, or discrediting a candidate. The Ardyn Erkh daily ran a front-page story on MPRP candidate S. Bayarmunkh titled, "How much

does it cost to blackmail a constituency?" (Note: Bayarmunkh is believed to be the owner of two TV channels and two newspapers. End Note.) Other articles have appeared to support candidates by assigning credit to politicians for alleged accomplishments. Zuuny Medee recently credited candidate D. Nyamhuu with "saving the children's playground" in a city district.

The Big Issue: Mongolia's Natural Resources

¶5. (SBU) Mongolia's media have, however, generally taken a higher road in covering the important and controversial issue of Mongolia's natural resources, and how to distribute the gains from them. In response to the DP's platform of "treasure sharing," the MPRP promised 1.5 million Tugruks (\$1,290) for every citizen under the slogan, "the country's profit." This was not contained in the MPRP's platform, leading critics to call it a violation of the Election Law. This allegation, and counter-allegations, led to conflicting news reports; some pinned the blame on the MPRP, while others rallied to the MPRP's defense.

TV Attacks and Advertisements

¶6. (SBU) This campaign season, Mongolia's usually staid domestic TV programming has been a virtual battleground for political parties and their proxies. On June 26, the leaders of the MPRP and DP held their first and only debate of the campaign. (See reftel.) Initially, the debate was to be held on Mongolian National Television. But the GEC warned that if the public broadcaster were to air the debate, it would be a violation of the Election Law provision requiring equal public airtime for all parties and candidates. In the end, the debate was aired on commercial TV.

¶7. (SBU) The parties have moved beyond mere attack and support ads to influence voting habits. As reported in Odriin Sonin, the Civil Will Party sent a letter to the GEC demanding a stop to an ad, which shows voters circling candidates from the same political party (6/16). Recent support ads have run the gimlet from adoration of a candidate to more subtle attempts to portray a candidate as closely tied to Mongolian traditions.

¶8. (SBU) The MPRP has even resorted to the music video as a form of campaigning: The video features citizens in Chinggis Khan-era traditional clothing and military garb, singing the praises of their motherland. A plethora of traditional Mongolian rituals and objects, such as calligraphy, abound as the MPRP logo and name appears as a watermark on the screen.

Advertising in the Capital

¶9. (SBU) In addition to the continued use of campaign trucks and Mongolian gers to disseminate party advisements, there has been an increase in canvassers filling the streets. These volunteers can be found outside grocery stores and in high pedestrian traffic areas handing out flyers and pamphlets. There have been reports of anonymous distribution of campaign literature. As the Odriin Sonin reports, voters from one city district received materials featuring photos of three candidates from three different parties. "None of the political parties admits to distributing this material" (6/19).

¶10. (SBU) In the weeks before the election, commercial billboards were hard to find as ever more campaign billboards filled the streets. Examples of candidate slogans on these signs include "Peace, Not War", "Together", and "Right Ideas, Right Choice." Despite early restraint by the parties, they have been unable to resist using the promise of money as an adverting strategy. After the DP flooded towns in 2004 with posters displaying a baby holding a ten thousand Tugruks bill (promising as much for every child), they have since upped the ante, according to critics. DP posters promise 1 million Tugruks for every citizen from the development of Mongolian's mining resources. "Certificates" bearing the MPRP logo, a Chinggis Khan image from the Mongolian 20,000 Tugruk bill, and two smiling Mongolians have been circulating.

¶11. (SBU) The parties have rolled out their true secret weapons in recent advertisement campaigns, using famous Mongolian celebrities

and pop stars to drum up support. This appears to be following the strategy followed by one successful candidate in 2004, whose campaign poster featured him alongside Mongolian's most famous sumo wrestlers.

Establishment of the Media Council

¶12. (SBU) As reported in the Unen newspaper, the GEC has established a Media Council to track the balance of election coverage by the media. According to a Ordiin Sonin article on June 20, "The main purpose of the Media Council is to monitor the equality of the candidates' media coverage, review complaints and make recommendations to the GEC following the election". Following the 2004 election, there were calls from watchdog NGOs such as Globe Institute for the creation of such a council.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) In the final week before the elections, , the candidates and parties are used available means to cast their opponents in a negative light. The media has closely reported these fights, but has also made the debate over Mongolia's natural resources a central issue. Nevertheless, the parties are primarily using advertising and promises to sway votes, rather than emphasizing specific policies and platforms. Nonetheless, citizens' intense interest and participation is generally a healthy sign regarding Mongolia's democratic development and commitment to free elections. End Comment.

MINTON